

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - A staff delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently visited Eritrea, which was designated a "country of particular concern" (CPC) by the State Department in September. The delegation discussed the religious freedom situation in formal meetings with leaders of the four major faiths sanctioned by the Eritrean government as well as with unregistered religious groups, senior Eritrean government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and members of the U.S. and foreign diplomatic communities.

In early 2004, the Commission recommended that the State Department designate Eritrea as a CPC. In its annual report it noted that the government of Eritrea engages in particularly severe violations of freedom of religion and belief. It violates the rights of members of various religious groups, including closing churches not belonging to officially recognized denominations, arresting participants at prayer meetings and other gatherings, and imprisoning armed forces members reportedly found in possession of certain religious literature.

"Following previous refusals to discuss religious freedom, citing national security concerns, the Eritrean government has recently agreed to do so," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "One can only hope that this new openness will lead to improvements in religious freedom conditions in Eritrea. The Commission continues to monitor the situation closely as it begins its annual CPC deliberation process and will be developing appropriate policy recommendations to the U.S. Government."

**The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Preeta D. Bansal ,
- Felice D. Gaer ,